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SUBJECT: QElection Fraud, Oppression, and Job Loss in Molodechno

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 15, Poloffs met with NGO and political activists in Molodechno, a mid-sized town near Minsk. The activists, who could have been talking about any town in Belarus, noted high governmental interference in their activities and massive electoral fraud. Opposition groups have suffered fines, arrests, set-ups, registration denials, and job loss. Pressure from the local authorities has scared away financial assistance from local businesses and the lack of venues makes it difficult to hold meetings and seminars. However, the activists continue, often unsuccessfully, to inform residents about serious community problems, such as mysterious deaths at the local military base. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Poloff met with head of the human rights NGO Vyasma Ales Kaputsky, lawyer for the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) and human rights activist Alexei Khvostik, head of Molodechno's Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Yan Logvinovich, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (BSDG) leader Eduard Balanchuk, and NGO coordinator and Logvinovich's wife, Olga, at Kaputsky's house, which also serves as the headquarters for his organization as well as the BPF and BSDG.

Massive Electoral Fraud

¶3. (C) Alexei Khvostik spoke of the authorities' electoral fraud techniques, which include forcing people to vote early, preventing observers from monitoring, and forging voters' signatures on ballots supporting pro-government candidates. In the 2001 presidential election, these techniques allowed Lukashenko to gain 99 percent of the vote in Molodechno. In the 2004 parliamentary elections, official figures indicated 70 percent of the electorate voted while Khvostik reported only 47 percent. The current mayor officially received 53 percent of the vote, but inner government sources told Khvostik that he had actually received 38 percent while a BKGB source reported 36 percent.

Limited Activities

¶4. (C) Kaputsky spoke of government harassment, which has made it difficult for NGOs and opposition parties to pursue their activities. Most organizations are not registered

and are unable to find venues for their functions. Only one independent news source, Regionalnaya Gazeta, operates in the city, but is often reluctant to advertise NGO and political party activities, let alone publish articles on important social issues. Due to little media access and governmental interference, information on the time and place of meetings is spread by word of mouth.

Political Activities

15. (C) Yan Logvinovich, head of Molodechno's BPF branch and a former leader of Malady Front announced that pro-Milinkevich candidates were chosen as delegates for the National Congress at regional conferences in Molodechno and Vileika. The regional conference in Molodechno was interrupted by a bogus fire alarm and cancelled when four fire engines, policemen, and representatives from the Ministry of Emergency Situations arrived and closed the building. Fortunately, the meeting reconvened at a different location.

16. (C) Logvinovich claimed there was an active, though small, youth movement in Molodechno that is constantly harassed by the authorities. Logvinovich's wife, Olga, is a coordinator of children's projects and founder of a teacher's club as well as an organizer for various educational seminars and professional training for local teachers. Unfortunately, government harassment has kept local teachers from participating.

Job Loss

17. (C) The activists noted how authorities use job security as a leverage of control over those involved in politics. Olga formerly worked as a psychologist at a secondary school in Molodechno, but was fired for her political activities. As a student, Logvinovich was expelled twice for his political activities and took a job as a forest ranger. He was then fired but eventually reinstated. Kaputsky is unemployed and BSDP leader Eduard Balanchuk can only find work as a truck driver. The authorities have offered them well-paying jobs as a way to "keep them quiet and vulnerable," but they refused.

Stings

18. (C) Balanchuk described how authorities set up stings to punish anyone who is politically active. Recently, Alexander Martynov, a prominent doctor and BHC activist, was arrested for possession and distribution of narcotic substances. According to Balanchuk, two of Martynov's patients approached him for clean needles and syringes. Once the patients got what they needed, the BKGB took them aside and made an agreement: testify that Martynov gave them narcotics in exchange for no further jail time for drug use. Martynov is now in an isolation cell and could face seven years in prison. His business has since closed and his family told BHC to not interfere with the case. Unfortunately, these tactics have frightened away most business support.

Concerns

19. (C) The activists expressed their concerns for the future in Molodechno. The new law on political parties and NGOs (septel) threaten their organizations' already shaky structure and the ever-increasing number of people seeking political asylum abroad is discrediting their cause. Balanchuk explained that ten Molodechno residents applied for political asylum in the EU because of alleged political oppression, but not at all were politically active. According to Balanchuk, these "political refugees" just want better social and living conditions and make the true

opposition look like fools, especially when the authorities use the stories in their propaganda.

¶10. (C) The second concern Khvostik spoke of dealt with his ongoing case of mysterious deaths at the local military base. The body of a soldier who guarded a military compound from which equipment is regularly stolen was found riddled with bullets. A sergeant was found dead with his arm broken and other severe injuries. The rumor is that the sergeant refused to go along with a racket that skimmed money allocated for the soldiers, which is supposedly a common practice in the army ranks. Therefore, he was tortured and hanged. A quick investigation ruled it a suicide. The victims' families met with the Minister of Defense, but did not receive any answer or assistance. According to Khvostik, over 200 Belarusian soldiers have mysteriously died in the last year.

Comment

¶11. (C) The activists' stories highlight the plight of social initiative groups, NGOs, and political parties across Belarus. Even though Kaputsky's organization is technically illegal, he still receives a steady flow of people who need legal counseling or help. The BPF is helping youth organizations gain registration and tries (mostly unsuccessfully) to hold seminars for locals on economic and government reform. Khvostik has succeeded in some aspects in helping young activists evade fines and/or jail time for their activities while working human rights cases pro bono. However, the authorities' pressure has made not just their work, but their lives difficult.

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